



Reading ready for uphill task

READING, determined not to become the latest victims of the Wycombe slope, were today having a dress rehearsal for Saturday's Cup-tie, writes **STEVE STAMMERS**.

It was a full-scale work-out on their training pitch a few miles outside Reading... a pitch that has similar contours to the infamous Loakes Park.

Wycombe means trouble for the unprepared. Loakes Park has been the scourge of many a visiting side.

Reading manager Charlie Hurley said today: "Of course I would have preferred to play them at home, but there's no good crying about that.

"Sure, the pitch poses a problem. But our training ground also has a slope like Wycombe's. Today's work-out will get us

used to the conditions we will face on Saturday."

Hurley, ever the positive thinker, prefers to look at the advantages rather than the disadvantages of playing at Wycombe.

"For a start, Wycombe is only 23 miles away, so we are sure to get a good following from our supporters.

"Then there is the atmosphere that the tie will generate. Professionals should react to that kind of atmosphere.

"So there are two big points in our favour. Am I hopeful of winning? I don't hope—I expect."

There are three other reasons why Reading think they will succeed—Eamonn Dunphy, Robin Friday and Tommy Youlden. All are back to fitness for the Cup-tie.

"Nice game to have a full-strength squad to pick from," said Hurley.

HITCHIN tackle Third Division Swindon at Top Field, having lost only three times in 28 games.

They expect a capacity crowd of 6,000 in their effort to emulate Isthmian colleagues Tooting, who put Swindon out of the Cup last season.

Hitchin have never beaten a Football League club or reached the third round—but they helped pay for the original trophy, which cost £20 in 1872.

Their one doubt is striker Peter Watson (cracked toe bone) whose two goals helped beat Weymouth at the fourth attempt in the last round.

WYCOMBE WANDERERS, one of the most successful non-League clubs, are confident of ending Reading's F.A. Cup hopes and booking themselves a place in Monday's third round draw.

While Reading were without a match last Saturday—the game against York being called off because of the frozen Elm Park pitch, Wycombe warmed up with a comfortable 2-0 win over Southall at Loakes Park.

The conditions at Wycombe were more suited to ice-skater John Curry than soccer, especially on the top wing, but Wycombe always looked a polished team against a somewhat ineffective Southall outfit.

Three of the men almost certain to play on Saturday were missing from the team. Goalkeeper John Maskell, mid-field player John Priestley and striker Tony Horseman. In their places were Pete Spittle, Peter Cruse (Cup-tied) and Howard Kettleborough (Cup-tied).

Wanderers confidently built their attacks from the back, with both full backs Paul Birdseye and Bob Davies overlapping as opportunities arose. The mid-field, with Kennedy a driving force and Holfield's darting runs, always had control.

Ian Pearson put Wycombe ahead last Saturday, being sent clear after a defensive mistake on the half-way line. He outpaced the defence to cheekily chip the ball over the Southall keeper's head. Then, in the second half, Dylan Evans rattled in a far post volley for the second goal.

However, and this is a point for Reading to bear in mind, many of the Wycombe fans to whom I spoke did not rate this year's team as highly as sides of the past, especially the one which fared so well against First Division giants Middlesbrough two seasons ago.

The pitch? The notorious slope, which, it is estimated drops 11 foot from corner to corner will certainly pose plenty of problems for Reading, especially in the opening 20 minutes. This will be the period when Wycombe will throw their attacking force at the visiting rearguard. If Reading can weather this period, then they can take control of the game.

However, if they allow Wycombe to gain the upper hand, then one must fear the worst—defeat, for the Wanderers will be urged on by a boisterous and partisan crowd.

Many defences have often been caught out on the slope, committing themselves and then being unable to get back as the Wanderers broke on the attack. Also, goalkeepers have fallen victims of the incline, again committing themselves to a cross, which they find, to their alarm, flighted higher than they believed.

Wycombe's Cup record, as shown elsewhere, makes for impressive reading and they have plenty to live up to if they are to emulate that past history.

Manager Ted Powell, a former player with the Wanderers, Sutton United and the British Olympic squad, took over at the helm this season, when Brian Lee called it a day.

Lee achieved all sorts of honours for Wycombe, making them into one of the most attractive sides outside the Football League and Powell is guiding this year's team along the same lines.

At present, they are top of the Rothmans sponsored Isthmian League and, although there is still a long way to go, must be considered one of the favourites for the title they last won two seasons ago. Last year Wycombe finished runners-up.

The only name in the Reading line-up to mean anything to Wycombe is striker Robin Friday from his days with Hayes. Friday is sure to be given a healthy respect from the Blues and the man with the task of shackling the Reading striker will be Keith Mead, who no doubt recalls Friday from his Hayes days.

As with Reading, Wycombe have one man who rings a bell at Elm Park... Alan Phillips. He was the man who ended Reading's hopes of a good run in the Cup last season with the only goal at Hendon, another Rothmans Isthmian League side.

HERE'S a breakdown of the two clubs' F.A. Cup record for the past five years:

WYCOMBE

1971-72: Lost to Slough in the first round; 1972-73: Did not qualify; 1973-74: beat Newport in the first round at home 3-1, lost by same score, also at home, to Peterborough in the second round; 1974-75: Beat Cheltenham 3-1 at home in the first round, drew 0-0 with Bournemouth at Loakes Park in the second round and then won 2-1 in the replay at Dean Court; Drew 0-0 with First Division Middlesbrough at Loakes Park in the third round, but lost to a last minute goal 1-0 in the replay at Ayresome Park; 1975-76: Beat Bedford 2-1 after two replays in the first round, but were beaten 1-0 at Cardiff in the second round; 1976-77: First round beat Waterlooville 2-1 away.

READING

1971-72: First round beat Bridgwater away 3-0, second round beat Aldershot 1-0 at Elm Park, drew 2-2 away to Blyth Spartans in the third round, but won replay at Elm Park 6-1, lost 2-1 in fourth round at home to First Division Arsenal; 1972-73: Beat Gillingham, away, 2-1 in the first round, then drew 0-0 at Hayes in the second round before winning replay 1-0, at home to Doncaster in the third round won 2-0, drawn away to eventual winners Sunderland, drew 1-1 at Roker Park, but lost replay 3-1; 1973-74: beat Slough 3-0 at home in first round, but were beaten 2-0 at Southend in round two; 1974-75: lost 4-0 in the first round to Swindon; 1975-76: Beaten 1-0 at Hendon in the first round; 1976-77: First round beat Wealdstone 1-0.